Focus and Elaboration – Carl Anderson

Tom Newkirk – Holding Onto Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones – section on curriculum: even in college, the twin issues that come up again and again are focus and elaboration

CCSS – as kids get older, should be able to write texts of higher and higher complexity. Need to learn to be able to control more and more material (i.e. focus) and also elaborate, write with precise and wonderful detail, grows.

At this time of the year, 95% of Carl’s conferences are elaboration conferences

What does it mean to write well?

Meaning

Structure

Detail - elaboration

Voice – intersection between meaning and structure

Conventions

What’s key to teach kids to focus their writing, control the amount of material – MEANING

* The message, the point, the angle, the thesis, etc.
  + Exemplar pieces –
    - Each sentence conveys the meaning – the meaning is clear and that helps her focus and choose what information/details to include
  + The meaning allows to have multiple parts structurally
* How to teach meaning:
  + Teach first how to figure out what the meaning is – Don Murray, in Write to Learn, in WNB, use it as a tool to write to learn what their meaning is, after they’ve chosen their topic.
    - E.g. conference with girl about Girl Scouts – in WNB, answer question: what am I trying to say here? What’s essential about this topic?; TP: one thing writers do is gather mini-stories. Another exercise you can practice in your notebook is to do reflection – not just what happened but why it’s important. The reason writers do this is because if you choose a topic, have a job to tell something more. You can do this so you have some ideas about, “what might I want to say about…” let me show you a place I did some thinking about the topics – why it’s important? I did some thinking, some reflecting, about why that story is important to me.
    - Critical to teach kids to use WNB to think about the meaning of their topic, so that they have a sense before they draft of what their piece is really about
  + May not have experiences of making meaning from life experiences. Have to show them how to think about it over and over again so they can grow into it.

Kid writing – issues with focus/meaning:

* All-about writing
  + Especially early in the year, when see this writing, huge focus issue – not using meaning to focus writing, don’t understand that writing is to show meaning. Need to learn to make choices – writing is about making choices. Craft is about making choices.
    - First thing ask the kid: what are you trying to say here? Then write only about that part that they talk about – redraft focusing on the important parts only
      * If say “I don’t know,” then teach to go into WNB and think about what want to say
      * (if too late in unit), say: I’m wondering if what you’re trying to say…well, if that’s really what you want to say, then you have some decisions to make about the text
* Have a meaning, but not fully in control of their writing yet – state meaning, maybe at the beginning, but then the elaboration/details don’t match the meaning; slightly more sophisticated then an all-about
  + Ask: is this really (weird)? (i.e. match your meaning/central idea)
  + As kids learn about meaning, sometimes see them set up a great meaning up front, but then write an all-about in the rest of the piece
  + Say: if your point is that…then what are you main things? easier to confer if catch during planning because can plan different parts; if during revision, draft some parts to match the meaning.
* Structural pattern around focus – compare/contrast (e.g. ordinary birds vs penguins, and their differences) : often lose the thread, lose control, as they get into their piece
  + Reasons they lose control of their drafts: reading and writing more nonfiction these days and it’s hard to write about new topics that you’ve researched because ALL ideas about it are new, and kids will go in and out of their thread; want anything they learned to go in because it feels like they did a lot of research
  + Growth in focus dips because they’re being challenged to write with more scenes or parts, and so begin to lose focus even though used to write focus – it’s harder to focus the larger, and more complex the text is they’re writing; as write higher level texts, breakdown in focus may be a sign of growth
  + Cut or rework a part so that they hold the thread
* Teach focus during planning AND revision
  + Planning: what’s your point? Which parts will you plan to fit in there.
  + Revision: what’s your point? What should you cut or add that fits your point?
* Kids who want to change their meaning to match the writing rather than change the writing to match the meaning – in Strategic Writing Conferences, there’s a conference to think about the meaning and rewriting the lead, so it does happen sometimes to change the meaning

Detail/Elaboration – common issues: as teach kids to focus their pieces, their pieces get shorter, especially in 3/4 grades, so need to teach about elaboration

* Two big ideas to teach about elaboration:
  + When writing in a genre, there’s a repertoire of different kinds of details
    - Narrative – action, thoughts, feelings, dialogue
    - Non-narrative – facts, definitions, citations of sources, quotes from experts
* Student examples: holy trinity of detail for elementary: if have three details (actions, thoughts, dialogue), and focused, then it sounds pretty good
  + Limited detail – all action – action is important because it’s the anchor detail of narrative (no action, no story); other details that are missing are the ones that really help convey the meaning of the piece
* Teaching moves for kids who are not using a variety of details
  + One of first moves is to teach kids to use different kinds of details – teach them what details there are for them to use (and they’ll probably use in patches first)
  + Next step is to weave – because after they’ve learned it, they’ll do patches of actions then thoughts; instead, teach them to weave it
* To elaborate, teach a repertoire of details and then teach them how to integrate them
  + When finish a sentence, ask self, “What kind of detail should come next? Should I do a …or…or…” and it depends on the genre and the meaning. Make that decision every line as a writer.
* Zip-file sentences: a compressed file that needs to be expanded; explosion
  + What elaboration is, to be more precise, needs more details (not more precise words in the sentence, but actually split the sentence apart into more parts)
    - Break the zip-file (e.g. a string of facts in non-narrative; in narrative, it’s slowing it down bit by bit and doing it in slow motion) down into its parts, into slow motion, like a flip book
    - Series of actions in narrative or series of facts in nonnarrative – demonstrate and show in mentor texts

“pull quote” in journalism – the subtitle that’s a part of the text pulled out to describe the article